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ABSTRACT

Although many educators believe that learning to read and write Mandarin Chinese is not easy (because of the complexities of its characters and grammar), it is common to find voracious and expert young readers in the early elementary school levels in Taiwan. The Chinese educational system is governed by a uniform curriculum and nationalized textbooks. In Taiwan, the first semester of the first grade is considered the most important in Chinese reading classrooms. A reading series called "Guo Yu" is provided. Reading instruction for first graders focuses on: (1) building up a strong oral vocabulary through extensive use of pictures; (2) developing automaticity in reading, writing, and blending the sound symbols; and (3) associating the symbols with characters by repeatedly reading, reciting, or copying the characters and sound symbols. Writing in the first grade classroom serves three purposes: improving the pupils' ability to identify and blend the sound symbols; developing proper handwriting; and sounding out and identifying characters automatically. Comprehension and study skills are the foci of subject area instruction required in the first-grade classroom. The concept of testing first-year pupils for placement is unheard of in Taiwan. Ability grouping in a classroom or across classrooms is forbidden and retention or assigning failing pupils to lower grade levels is not practiced at the elementary school. Most Chinese parents, whether they are working parents or parents with limited school education, consider their children's education a priority. (A table listing textbook contents in "Guo Yu" first grade and two writing samples from first-graders are included.) (RS)

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Learning to Read in Chinese First Grade Classrooms

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Learning to Read in Chinese First Grade Classrooms

"Chinese is the only language in the world in which the basic units or characters represent a concept or parts of concepts rather than sounds." (Yang, 1971, p. 23). The Chinese language contains approximately 44,908 traditional characters (Chi, 1962). Homophonous characters in Chinese abound; therefore, different logographs are used to represent different meanings. Many common characters contain a great number of strokes, such as "鬱" (sadness) which includes 30 strokes. A single character or a combination of the same characters contain meaning, such as "人人" (everyone). And, some characters in the combination will lose their original meaning, such as "東西" (things) which contains "東" (east) and "西" (west) (Yang, 1971).

The Chinese language has no inflections, no infinitives, no participles, no gerunds, no irregular verbs, and no articles (Flesch, 1946). Some characters are used to indicate passive voice, such as "被" (bèi), and tenses, such as "已經" (ǐ jing = have + pp.). People who have higher or traditional education tend to use less punctuation and the adoption of punctuation is very recent (Yang, 1971).

The complexities of characters and grammar have added to the difficulties of learning the Chinese language (Yang, 1971). Furthermore, many studies in the United States have provided evidence about the difficulties of read-

ing words logographically. Logographic readers recognize words by guessing unfamiliar words in context or by mistaking the words for familiar sight words (Mason, 1980). The readers could not recognize the signs when the environmental cues were removed (Masonheimer, Drum & Ehri, 1984). "The associations formed between visual cues and words are hard to remember unless practiced frequently because they are unsystematic and arbitrary" (Ehri, 1991, p. 388).

Many educators have believed that it is not easy to learn to read and write Mandarin Chinese. However, it is common to find voracious and expert young readers in the early elementary school levels in Taiwan. Chi (1962) has found that Chinese elementary school graduates are able to use approximately 3,654 characters. Recent evidence is further provided by the principal and three Chinese teachers at Bei Wen Primary School, Chia-yii City, Taiwan, who expressed, "We are quite satisfied with the pupils' performance in learning to read. And those students who can not read well are those who are mentally retarded, hyperactive, or learning disabled." Therefore, this article attempts to probe the reasons of the satisfaction expressed by most of the Chinese primary school teachers in Taiwan.

In Taiwan, the first semester in the first grade is considered the most important in Chinese reading classrooms. It also differs considerably from the other semester regarding the instructional foci. Therefore, this article ex-

plores the factors that influence the success or failure in learning to read at the very beginning stage. These factors include Gúo Yǔ: a nationalized reading program, the foci in classroom reading instruction, the role of subject areas in improving learning to read, the role of writing and assessment in the reading classrooms, classroom management, and parents and community involvement.

Guo Yu: A Learning to Read Program

The Chinese educational system in Taiwan is governed by a uniform curriculum and nationalized textbooks. A reading series called Gúo Yǔ, which contains 13 volumes from grades one to six, is provided. Two textbooks, primer and first reader, are used in the first semester of the first grade (Department of National Compilation, 1989, 1990). The primer, transcribed only in Tsu In system which contains 37 sound symbols and five tones (See appendix A), is used in the first eight weeks; followed by the first reader which is written in characters with their sound symbols following on the right. Table 1 shows the major features of the Gúo Yǔ primer and the first reader. A workbook is available for each textbook (Department of National Compilation, 1989).

Table 1: Textbook Contents In Guó Yǔ First Grade

First Semester Reading Porgrams

level	primer	first reader
lessons offered	14	12
words per selection	Mean 22.4	Mean 49.4
topics	school, home, classroom, job, hobbies, travel, play, instructions, weather	
characters	I & we	
punctuation	introduced through bracket and teacher's oral reading	
literary styles	experience or factual description & narration	
selection follow up activities	reading aloud, dictation, sound symbols blending,	reading aloud, character writing, words with multiple meaning
special features	texts written in sound symbols only, bracket used to chunk meaning units, two pages of pictures with no print preceding each text	texts written in characters plus sound symbols, new words listed below each text, repeated sentences
written convention	top to down from right to left	

Guó Yǔ has fewer lessons and the text is short in length. The stories in Guó Yǔ are functional, centered around family life, school activities, and first-hand experiences. The stories are developed using first person; that is, the pupils are either the narrators or the participants. Punctuation is not clearly introduced but each sentence of a passage is written on a single line to indicate the beginning and the end. Follow up activities after each selection center on dictation, blending the sound symbols, and developing proper handwriting. Comprehension beyond the word or sentence level, study skills, thinking skills, selecting books to read, writing process, knowledge about the authors or different literary styles are not discussed. Pictures are more often used to develop the pupils' oral vocabulary.

Preparatory materials are limited in variety in Guó Yǔ reading series. The teacher's manual, according to the teachers interviewed, is unavailable. The teaching objectives and a simple teaching step are briefly stated in the preface of each textbook (Department of National Compilation, 1989, 1990).

What Are Focused in Classroom Reading Instruction?

In Taiwan, with the nationalized textbooks and curriculum, the learning to read instruction for the first graders in the first semester focuses on three areas: building up a strong oral vocabulary through an extensive use of pictures, developing automaticity in reading, writing, and blending the sound

symbols in the Tsù In system, and associating the symbols with characters by repeatedly reading, reciting, or coping the characters and sound symbols together to eventually form sight words.

The teachers believe that the ability to blend the sound symbols helps the pupils read extensively. Furthermore, most Chinese characters consist of one, two, or three phonemes. It is rather simple for the pupils to learn to blend the sounds. Therefore, the teachers and the texts use the pupils' world knowledge and orally familiar texts to develop the pupils' ability in reading and blending the sound symbols in order to free the pupils from depending too much on the teacher.

In classrooms, the most common activities may include talking and discussing about pictures, group dictation, choral reading, story telling, recitation of a text, or coping characters and their corresponding sound symbols. The homework include recitation of a text, sentence making, coping the same phrases and their corresponding sound symbols repeatedly, and writing short passages with sound symbols, or writing to describe a picture.

The Role of Writing in the Reading Classroom

Chinese pupils start writing using the 37 sound symbols, then move to the character writing stage. The pupils are required to learn to hold their pen properly and write when they enter the first grade. Writing in the first grade

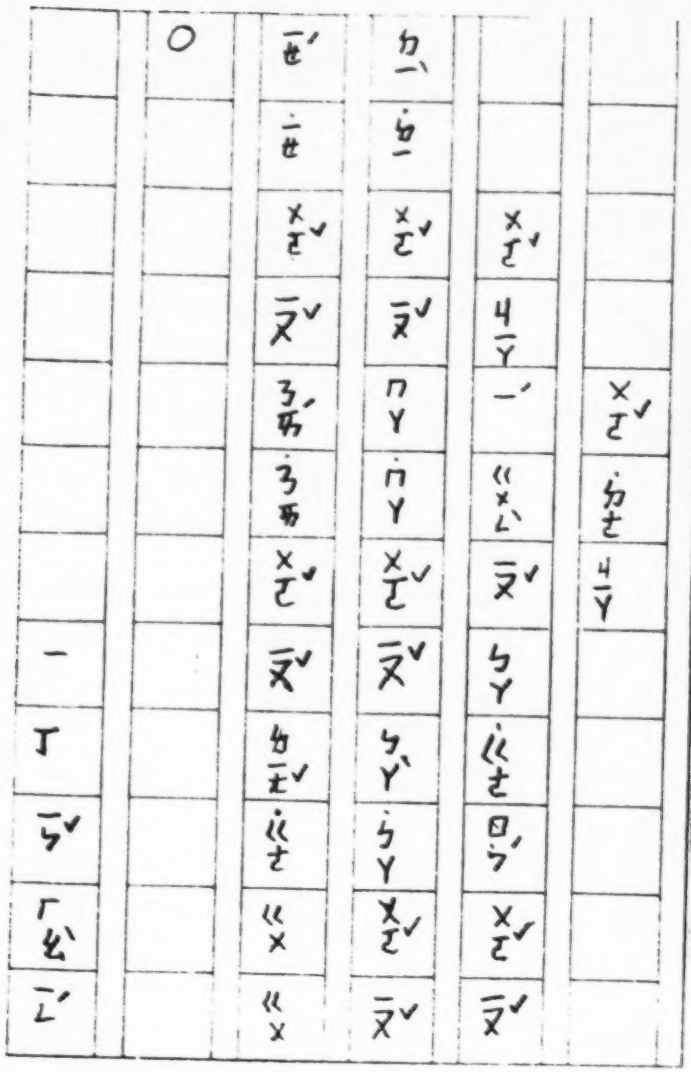
classroom serves three purposes: improving the ability of identifying and blending the sound symbols, developing a proper handwriting, and making sounding out and identifying characters automatic.

The writing is parallel to the pupils' oral ability, for the first graders are often asked to use the sound symbols to write about home, pets, and what they see on the way to school or on a trip. When the characters are introduced, the pupils are gradually required to use the characters they have learned to write. However, they are also allowed to transcribe the characters they can not write.

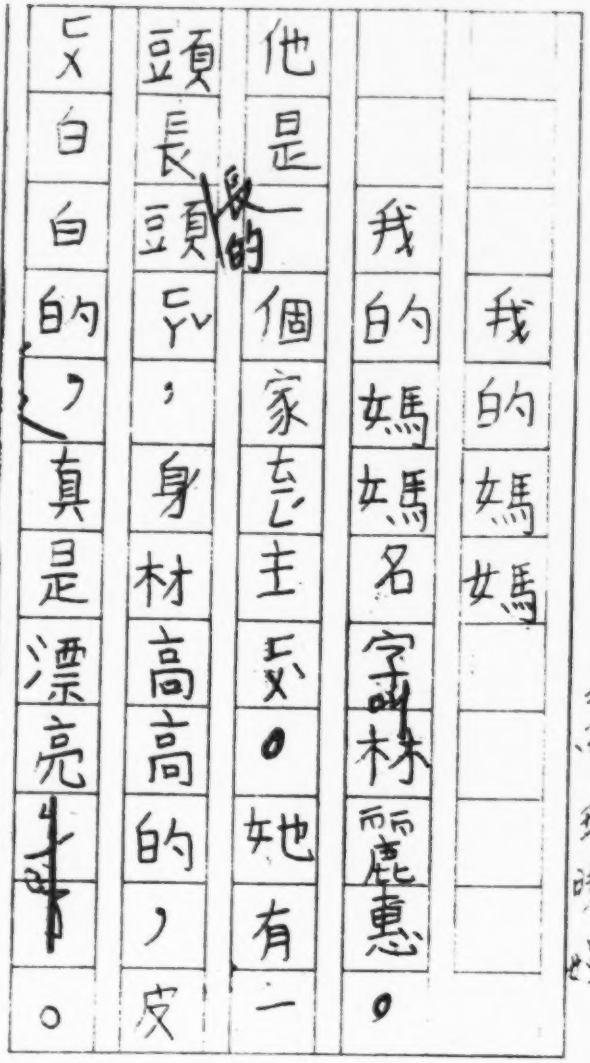
With the pupils advancing into higher grade levels, a piece of good writing may be judged by the content and the number of characters used. Good handwriting is always complimented by the teachers or the parents. Punctuation is gradually emphasized when the pupils are more able to handle character writing. Figure A shows two pieces of writing by a first grader and a second grader in the first semester. The first grader used only sound symbols and no punctuations to break sentences. The second grader used only a comma to break sentences and used sound symbols to replace characters she could not write.

FIGURE A: Writing samples

A: first grader



B: second grader



The Role of Other Subject Areas in Improving Learning to Read

Arithmetic, science, social studies, health education, ethics, arts, and music and play are required courses in the first grade classroom. Textbooks for those content areas are provided with the majority of the content depicted in pictures. Sound symbol transcription or some characters followed by sound symbols are used for the topics, captions of pictures, and instructions.

In instruction, the teacher, who is also the same person teaching the language arts, guides the pupils to talk about and discuss the pictures. The teachers ask the pupils questions in accordance with the pictures. Occasionally, the teacher transcribes a few sentences in sound symbols to describe the pictures. When the pupils are more familiar with blending the sound symbols, the characters are phased in based on the judgment of the teacher. The pupils are not responsible for copying the sentences. But the teacher would guide them to read aloud the sentences near the end of each section.

Comprehension and study skills are the foci of instruction in the subject areas. These are much emphasized on the pupils' workbooks and homework, and are evaluated in mid-term and final examinations in which the pupils are asked to choose the intended picture among a series of pictures or answer True/False or multiple-choice questions with the help of the sound symbols or characters accompanied by sound symbols.

The Role of Assessment in the Reading Classroom

The concept of testing the first year pupils for placement is unheard of at the elementary levels in Taiwan. Local or across schools testing is very rare at the early grade levels. The most common ways of assessing the pupils' performance are reading aloud for miscues and dictation at the end of each lesson. However, all the elementary pupils are administrated three school-wide examinations, called Knowledge and Ability Test, for all academic areas per semester for achievement assessment. The school prepares the test questions which are based mainly on the textbooks, and gives the test to each grade level. The scores for each pupil in the same class are calculated and averaged and compared with other classes at the same level.

Most teachers respond that the comparison of the achievement tests presses them to place more demands on the pupils because the school and parents use them as the sole indicator of their teaching performance. This promotes more instruction on rote memorization. Quizzes and dictations are very common. Those who fail to write characters correctly may be assigned to copy those missed characters or phrases repeatedly as homework.

Classroom Management

Ability grouping in a classroom or across classrooms is forbidden and

retention or assigning failing pupils to lower grade levels is not a practice at the elementary school. Usually 45 to 50 pupils are randomly assigned to one teacher in a classroom. The same teacher teaches most of the required courses. The first graders attend class half a day for six days a week. They come to class before 7:30 in the morning to attend a 30-minute silent reading or study period until the flag-raising ceremony at 8:10.

In classroom instruction, the teacher initiates and guides the pupils through the steps in each lesson. All students are seated in lines and rows with two pupils sharing the same desk facing the blackboard. The students are not free to move the desk or chair away from his/her designated sitting position. Classroom noises are not tolerated by the principal and other classroom teachers. However, whole class choral reading is very common.

The teacher observes the strengths and weaknesses of each pupil through teaching the different courses. For students who fail to read or write characters correctly, the teacher may either provide immediate modeling, or retain the student after class to provide extra instruction, or assign the problematic areas for the student to repeatedly practice as an extra homework.

Parents and Community Involvement

Some other direct influencing factors other than the elementary classrooms that contribute to reading development include parents' involvement,

attending kindergartens, and commercial book publishers' involvement. Most Chinese parents, no matter whether they are working parents or parents with limited school education, place their children's education as a priority. Fully cooperation with the early grade teachers are very obvious for most parents. They may supervise their children's homework, buy commercial lesson worksheets and a variety of science books or simplified Chinese historical story books, and allocate play and study time at home. Parents can choose the school they want their children to attend by changing one of the parents and their children's home address to the intended school district without actually moving the home. If the parents are familiar with the school principal or teachers, they may try to choose the teacher they want. If they are not satisfied with their children's performance at school, they may send their children to study centers to get help from some other teachers by paying a small amount of fee or move to other schools.

Attending kindergartens in Taiwan is not mandatory. However, most parents believe that attending kindergarten is necessary. The kindergarten education offers the children from different family backgrounds to learn to read and identify the 37 Chinese sound symbols, to become familiar with some of the Chinese language conventions, and to have a chance to be read to, especially for those parents who have limited education or have limited time with their children.

The publishers, when publishing children's newspapers, magazines, and books, all include the sound symbols on the right of each character. Many publishers offer children's books in low prices which makes the commercial books quite available for different families. This also allows many parents to buy books and read with their preschoolers.

Conclusion

The success of Chinese pupils in learning to read depends on many factors. The use of the easy-to-learn Tsu In system is preparing the pupils an early foundation of a skill for extensive independent reading. The limited contents and lessons in Guó Yǔ reading program enable the pupils more practice for using the common characters and allow the pupils more freedom to read commercial books on their own. The emphasis of reading in the early content areas allows the pupils to learn more knowledge on Chinese characters and study skills. The emphasis of early writing provides the pupils more practice on the Chinese language conventions, handwriting, and exploring a variety of unfamiliar characters by asking parents or older siblings through the aid of the sound symbols. Parents in turn help motivate their children and provide maximum supports for adjusting their children's needs both in and out of school.

Some of these factors, such as parents' attitudes, writing, and reading

books other than classroom textbooks, increase in demand when the grade levels go higher. The use of sound symbols in helping reading characters gradually decrease and may phase out totally at the fifth grade for the content subjects. The Chinese literature course will still use the sound symbols occasionally in helping sixth graders or beyond read the unfamiliar characters.

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APPENDIX A

Chinese phonemes						Approximate sounds						five tones	
													e.g.
ㄓ	ㄔ	ㄐ	ㄍ	ㄉ	ㄅ	$\breve{tz}$	$\breve{ts}$	dʒi	gə	də	bə	1.	ㄉ
ㄔ	ㄕ	ㄑ	ㄎ	ㄊ	ㄆ	$\bar{ts}$	$\breve{ts}$	tʃi	kə	tə	pə	2. ˊ	ㄉˊ
ㄙ	ㄕ	ㄒ	ㄏ	ㄋ	ㄇ	$\bar{s}$	$\breve{s}$	si	hə	nə	mə	3. ˇ	ㄉˇ
	ㄖ			ㄌ	ㄈ		$\breve{ʒ}$			lə	fə	4. ˋ	ㄉˋ
	ㄦ	ㄢ	ㄞ	ㄚ	ㄧ		$\breve{r}$	an	aɪ	a	i	5. ·	ㄉ
		ㄣ	ㄟ	ㄛ	ㄨ			ən	e	ə++	u+		
		ㄤ	ㄠ	ㄜ	ㄩ			aŋ	aʊ	ə+++	y+		
		ㄥ	ㄡ	ㄝ				əŋ	o	ɛ			

Notes:

1. "ˇ" pronounced with tongue tip slightly curled, such as "$\breve{ts}$".
2. "ˉ" pronounced with tongue tip flat, such as "$\bar{ts}$".
3. + pronounced with lips rounded.
4. ++ center tongue sound.
5. +++ back tongue sound.
6. "ㄧ", "ㄨ", and "ㄩ" are the only three phonemes that can go between two other phonemes, i.e. "$\frac{ㄅ}{ㄢ}$", "$\frac{ㄈ}{ㄨㄥ}$", and "$\frac{ㄉ}{ㄩㄥ}$".
7. The phonemes from "ㄚ" to "ㄥ" are the ending sounds. "ㄦ" is an independent phoneme.